

The New Avatar Of The Taj

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The Taj Samudra is an icon in the landscape of Colombo City. Iconic in the sense

that it is has remained in the country for more than 30 years since its establishment in 1983, journeying with the country through good times and bad. With its recent renovations, the Taj Samudra has emerged with a new face and has opened its doors to provide a greater range of facilities and services to cater to the modern traveller. Rohit Khosla, General Manager of the Taj Samudra spoke of the new avatar of the Taj.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe Photographs Indika De Silva

Can you describe the journey of Taj in Sri Lanka?

Taj Hotels have had a very good history in Sri Lanka since commencing operations in 1983 with Taj Samudra. This is an eleven and a half acre property facing the Galle Face Green. Sri Lanka was keen to have Taj-an international hotel brand-in the city of Colombo. We started with this 300 room property and later expanded to include the 162 room Vivanta By Taj (formerly known as Taj Exotica) in Bentota. Taj also undertook the management contract of the Airport Garden hotel in Seeduwa, which has been rebranded as The Gateway Hotel and is owned by the Hirdaramani Group and the Advani family.

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The Taj Group has four brands, the Taj Luxury Brand; which is the Taj Samudra, Vivanta By Taj, which is in Bentota, and is upper-up-scale, then, we have the Gateway Hotel, which is an up scale brand and finally Ginger, a value for money brand that has not yet made its foray internationally out of India. Established in 1903 with the opening of the Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai, Taj has 125 hotels across the world and operate in many geographies with over 25,000 employees. Taj Hotels is owned by the TATA Group, which is a renowned Indian conglomerate engaged in diverse sectors.

Being a part of such an illustrious organisation we are very proud to have been a part of the history of Sri Lanka. We remained in Sri Lanka throughout the conflict

though others came to Sri Lanka but moved on when things got difficult. We have proven our commitment to Sri Lanka by persevering through the course of the conflict. It was a rough time for us, but we are glad that we stayed, because in this post-conflict era we see a resurgence in the economy, as the market is buoyant and tourism is on an upswing. With the Mahinda Chintana-Vision for the Future there is a clear direction in identifying tourism as one of the key drivers of the economy. The government has an aim of reaching 2.5 million tourists and three billion US dollars in revenue by 2016. As part of the industry and being aware of the targets of the government, we too are focusing on the same. Last year Sri Lanka crossed the mark of 1.2 million tourist arrivals. We are confident about the future of Sri Lanka and are proud to be a part of the journey.

The Taj is a reputed brand with a very wide distribution and marketing network as our presence worldwide. We have a well-recognised loyalty programme. We believe that our guests experience true warmth and hospitality in our products where each and every Taj hotel provides the guest with a sense of space and place. We truly believe that the Taj provides the guests with an international standard of hospitality where they will go back with warm memories of not only the hotel, but also of the country. We consider ourselves to be ambassadors of the country we operate in.

How would you describe the Sri Lankan market?

Sri Lanka is a great destination and a beautiful island. It is truly the Wonder of Asia. We can see great diversity within a small geographical area. From a business perspective, due to its location in the main shipping routes, the country is positioned well as a maritime and logistics hub. The country has a rich history, beaches, holiday experiences, adventure sports, tasty food, warm hospitality and cultural and religious diversity. No matter which part of the country you are in, everything is nearby because of the size of the island. It does not take a person long to travel from one point to another and with infrastructure being developed rapidly, travelling has become much faster.

We Decided That The Time Had Come For Us To Make A Big Change And We Invested 20 Million US Dollars Over A Two Phase Period, Which Would Completely Reposition The Taj As A Luxury Hotel.

Sri Lanka is a destination that travellers can visit and have a wide variety of

experiences, whether you are here for business, as part of a tour group or as an individual traveller wanting to discover Sri Lanka.

The Taj has gone through an extensive period of renovation and has emerged with a new look. What was the motive behind this renovation?

We went through a very tough period during the 30-year long conflict and business was not very good at that time. Tourism was in a very bad state and survival for us was quite difficult. Though we survived that bad time, we are very conscious of the fact that we were not able to keep pace with the rest of the hotel products across the world. We were definitely not ready for the future where additional rooms would be required and new brands will come into the market. Post return of peace, we decided that the time had come for us to make a big change and invested 20 million US dollars over a two phase period, which would completely reposition the Taj Samudra as a luxury hotel. We kept in mind product, service and experience, which will be on par with the best in the world. Colombo deserves that and we are very happy to provide that to this vibrant city.

What are the new features that the guests can experience?

We were conscious of the fact that the hotel needed a complete transformation because it has been in the local market for sometime. We wanted to make sure that from arrival to departure our guests will experience the new avatar of Taj. That is exactly what we did and now the guests can enjoy a totally new arrival experience and a lovely lounge café-Lattice, that offers some of the best blends of teas and coffees.

Usually upon arrival guests queue up at counters and have to wait in line to check-in. We have replaced this with a more personalised concept where guests can check-in at sit down desks. You don't have to stand in a queue, you can sit in the lobby area where you will be welcomed warmly. There is one-to-one interaction without being part of a crowd. Then the luxurious rooms are 530 sqft and can be considered to be the largest rooms in Colombo, equipped with four fixture bathrooms and state- of-the-art facilities. We have a Presidential floor with a Presidential Suite-the TATA Suite. This floor can be fully segregated from the hotel to allow for VIP delegations to be in an enclosed and secure space. These are the kind of physical things that a person is going to see. Our hotel is not just about glass, steel, and gold. What is important is not only the physical aspects but also

the experiences, comfort and the warmth of the hotel. Sri Lankan hospitality is bespoke in the sense that we create the experiences that the guests require. We pride ourselves in maintaining high standards and a quality level of service.

The Taj Samudra with sweeping views of the Indian Ocean, its central location, expansive eleven and a half acres of tropical garden along with the upgraded physical product, beautiful rooms and services cannot be beaten. We have also launched a new product by the name of Taj Club. These rooms offer exclusive privileges and facilities such as access to a lounge, personalised room check-in and express check-out, business centre services, meeting room facility as well as butler and concierge services. These are the requirements of a business hotel. Colombo is more of a business destination than a tourist destination. The Taj Samudra is targeting business travellers while we also cater to tourists and travel groups. But they form a very small part of an overall business mix. We have introduced many products geared to fulfill the business travellers' requirements.

Rohit Khosla

Director of Operations-TAL Hotels & Resorts and Taj Safaris Area Director (Sri Lanka) & General Manager

With over 22 years of experience including in other global hotel chains, Rohit Khosla has now worked with the Taj Group over a decade. He brings with him to Colombo the know-how of having performed in the Taj group's international hotel portfolio as well as luxury properties such as the Taj Lands End, Mumbai -"A Leading Hotel of the World"-where he was prior to arriving in Sri Lanka.

As Director of Operations - TAL Hotels & Resorts and Taj Safaris, Area Director (Sri Lanka) and General Manager - Taj Samudra, Rohit Khosla's varied portfolio entails that he overlooks wilderness lodges in the heart of India, two hotels in the Maldives and of course the three Taj properties in Sri Lanka - Taj Samudra, Colombo, Airport Garden Hotel and Vivanta by Taj, Bentota, with a total employee base of about 1,200.

Khosla holds a Diploma in Hotel Management and Catering Technology from the Institute of Hotel Management, Mumbai as well as a Post Graduate Diploma in Hotel Administration and Management from the Institute of Hotel Management Mumbai. He is also a graduate of the General Manager's Programme for Taj Group at the

Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore.

He has received many accolades over his current tenure in the hotel industry. The most recent achievement is for being chosen as the President of the SKAL Sri Lanka Chapter for the year 2014-2015. Khosla is also an Executive Committee member of the THASL (The Hotel Association of Sri Lanka).

Some noteworthy highlights of Khosla's achievements include being chosen to become the Deputy Team Leader and Senior Business Leader for the TBEM External Assessment Team for TATA Tea, Kolkata in 2008, as well as being presented the award of the Young Hotel General Manager in 2006 by the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Associations of India (FH&RA). He has also won 12 prestigious awards for the Taj President at the Annual General Manager's Meet held at Taj Residency, Lucknow in 2007.

He is fluent in both English and Hindi and has a basic knowledge of both spoken and written Arabic.

He currently resides in Colombo, Sri Lanka with his lovely wife and two children.

We have created a whole new vibe and energy within the hotel with a lovely pool, upgraded fitness centre and a very nice café called Pebbles. We continue to offer great dining experience with Schezuan cuisine at the Golden Dragon, all day dining at Latitude, the best Indian cuisine at the Navratna and a lovely fine dining restaurant, Steak & Grill House. We have introduced a new concept to the city of Colombo, which is called the resto-bar where it combines a restaurant and a bar in one. This new offering is called YUMI. It is a very popular concept in New York, London, Singapore and Hong Kong.

We have completed phase one of our renovations, and in phase two we will be addressing the balance rooms, the Golden Dragon Restaurant and Ballroom, a new business centre and some of the public areas. Future plans for this year is obviously to complete this work. We want to be fully functional and establish ourselves as a truly luxury brand before the others come in.

Therefore, the Taj serves great cuisine, a place to relax, rewind, rejuvenate, and

recover from a busy day, whether he/she is a business or leisure traveller.

You mentioned that the target customer segment for the Taj is the business traveller. Would you say the high-end business traveller?

Usually we have products that cater to different levels. Our deluxe rooms cater to the traveller who may be middle-management, then luxury rooms target senior management and for the top most level we have products such as the Taj Club rooms and suites. We have segregated the business traveller and we have products to meet the value requirements of each segment. We have a four pronged approach to attract this category of travellers to the hotel.

Do you plan on expanding your reach in terms of hotels in Sri Lanka?

We have three properties in Sri Lanka, and we are looking at expanding with management contracts rather than acquiring new properties. We invested 20 million US dollars in renovating Taj Samudra and with that amount of money we could have bought two hotels down south. We did not do that because it is not only about spending money, but also about repositioning ourselves. We invested 12.5 million US dollars in the rebranding of Taj Exotica as Vivanta By Taj in Bentota. The owners of the Airport Garden Hotel invested a large sum of money and built another block of rooms and it was rebranded as The Gateway Hotel. It is now a 200 room property. We basically concentrated on uplifting and adding on to our existing facilities. We are keen on expanding to other parts of the country whether it be the cultural triangle, or whether it is the East Coast or the Northern Peninsula, but we are keen to expand through the management contract route since we have made significant investment into our existing properties.

There are many new international properties that are being established in close vicinity to the Taj. How do you plan to face the new competition?

We welcome competition, because competition is something that makes us remain on our toes and helps us to keep ahead of the game. We can provide the guests with the best experiences and value for money. We are aware of the great developments happening around the city of Colombo. In the next three to five year horizon, we will see a large number of international brands making a foray into the hospitality industry in Sri Lanka and in Colombo and we are confident in dealing with this competition. In other geographies that we operate, we have had to deal with this competition, this is a part of our competitive set. Whether it is Shangri-La,

Hyatt, Movenpick or Marriot all these hotels are operating in locations where we are also operating, as such they are not new competition. Each company brings to the table a certain value proposition. We firmly believe that our value proposition is superior to the others and we keep on working tirelessly to ensure that it is ahead of the competition, so that the guests consider us as their preferred choice.

The Ministry Of Economic Development Has Taken Much Effort To Push The Destination Into The International Market.

Our competition is three to five years old. The earliest competition will come into the market in about a year and a half from now. We have that time as we are already ahead. We have the knowledge of operating in this market for over 30 years, it is not going to be easy for someone to just walk in and out with this relationship; it does not work like that. Our distribution channels are far more ingrained. Our job is to consistently strengthen and build those relationships and ensure that we are at the top of the mind recall for anyone who is coming to Sri Lanka.

The government has extended many programmes and initiatives to further the growth of the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. What are your thoughts on this?

We are very happy with the work that the Ministry of Economic Development is doing in Sri Lanka. After a lull in promoting the country where it was happening sporadically without any direction, we now see a clear plan. The ministry has approved many initiatives such as advertising, road show initiatives, mall activation initiatives and all types of trade fairs where there is an official government presence. The Ministry of Economic Development has taken much effort now to push the destination into the international market. It helps us too when Sri Lanka is selected as the number one destination to visit by Lonely Planet and as a hot destination by other publications. These do not happen on their own. I believe that the Sri Lankan government, Ministry of Economic Development and other organisations that are associated with it are working very hard to promote the country because we can see the results of that today.

In terms of the number of tourist arrivals to the country, we have achieved more than the target. The tourism industry is growing and we also contribute to the initiatives of the government. We participate in trade fairs such as ITB and WTM. We have been very fortunate to partner with the government's initiative in India where

Sri Lanka Tourism has done road shows and mall activations in Mumbai and Bangalore, and in these two cities the Taj partnered with Sri Lanka Tourism to ensure that we have the venues to do the events in style.

We are working with the government and we are confident that we will be able to achieve the targets. There are many infrastructure development projects happening; highways, new airports and re-laying of rail tracks, which we believe will enhance the connectivity within the country. This helps to push tourism and we are on the right track. Public private partnership is the key to progress and we are very happy that we are able to participate in the government's development programmes.

Final thoughts.

The tourism industry is one of the largest earning industries in the world. It employs the maximum number of people. Therefore, the value of this industry for the economy and for the country is tremendous. Infrastructure development will benefit businesses and tourism opens a gateway into the country and into the economy. Therefore, we are in the right place at the right time. The industry is buoyant and with new brands coming into the country, we will ensure that there is a wide variety of choice for travellers.

We will have challenges such as the availability of trained human resources, availability of raw materials, challenges in terms of the environment and ensuring that the businesses are done in a viable manner. These are the challenges that we will face, but we are upbeat about it. Performances during the last couple of months have shown that we are moving in the right direction and we are looking forward to a great future.

